

**Program Summary
State Land Department
Natural Resource Conservation Districts**

Program Overview

Administered by the State Land Department, the Natural Resource Conservation District (NRCD) program promotes the restoration and the conservation of land and soil resources of the state. The State Land Department is also responsible for ensuring that NRCDs are complying with state laws and regulations. The NRCD program was established in response to the 1930's dust bowl and is authorized under A.R.S Title 37, Chapter 6. NRCDs currently cover the entire state, including tribal lands, with 42 districts, 10 of which are organized under tribal law. However, the State Land Department provides no funding and oversight for the 10 tribal districts. The purpose of the districts is defined in statute as follows:

“to provide for the restoration and conservation of lands and soil resources of the state, the preservation of water rights and the control and prevention of soil erosion, and thereby to conserve natural resources, conserve wildlife, protect the tax base, protect public lands and protect and restore this state's rivers and streams and associated riparian habitats, including fish and wildlife resources that are dependent on those habitats, and in such a manner to protect and promote the public health, safety and general welfare of the people” (A.R.S § 37-1001).

Formation and Operation

An NRCD is formed, upon approval by the land commissioner, at the request of landowners. Once approved, the State Land Department is responsible for the oversight of an election to create the NRCD and elect supervisors. Landowners in the NRCD elect 3 supervisors, and 2 supervisors are appointed by the Land Commissioner. With the exception of the first supervisors elected, the term of an elected officer is 6 years (A.R.S § 37-1051). After the initial election, only district cooperators are allowed to vote for district supervisors. A district cooperator is a district resident, who owns land and has agreed to conserve the natural resources under their control.

NRCDs are locally operated by a combination of paid employees and volunteers. An NRCD will also partner with other state, local, and federal agencies to develop conservation programs for areas located in the NRCD. NRCDs provide education about natural resources and conservation practices, provide technical support to district cooperators, and conduct local program outreach. NRCD activities include

soil, water and natural resource conservation, watershed management programs, the protection of open space and farmland, and integrated land use planning.

EQIP Grants and Education Centers

As part of the partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Services (NRCS) Office, NRCDs play a role in the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Under NRCS rule 515.23, NRCDs are responsible for identifying local resources concerns and priorities for EQIP grants, recommending application and evaluation processes for EQIP grants, and assisting NRCS with local information and outreach activities. In Federal FY 2005, Arizona received \$21 million in EQIP funding. NRCDs do not receive these grants. They are distributed directly to the landowners and lessees for environmental projects.

NRCD-sponsored education centers are authorized by A.R.S § 37-1054. Their purpose is “to promote a scientifically sound, balanced appreciation and awareness of Arizona's environment and the wise management of all natural resources.” Education centers provide statewide delivery of environmental education programs, classroom programs, and continuing education credits for educators. A NRCD can sponsor an education center either individually or in cooperation with another district. Currently, 26 districts sponsor 21 education centers.

Program Funding

The NRCD program receives funding from the General Fund and the Environmental Special Plate Fund. In FY 2006, the program is funded at \$446,100. This is a decrease of (28)% or \$(173,900) from FY 2001. *Table 1* displays the historical funding information for the NRCD program by fund source, using data from FY 2001, FY 2005, and FY 2006.

Table 1			
NRCD Program Funding History			
<u>Fund</u>	<u>FY 2001</u>	<u>FY 2005</u>	<u>FY 2006</u>
General Fund	\$490,000	\$110,000	\$180,000
Environmental			
Special Plate Fund	<u>130,000</u>	<u>320,000</u>	<u>266,100</u>
Total	<u>\$620,000</u>	<u>\$430,000</u>	<u>\$446,100</u>

All funding for the NRCD program is allocated for grants. However, the State Land Department has 1

FTE Position that oversees the program as part of its job responsibilities. A.R.S. § 37-1014 allows the State Land Department to request \$30,000 for each NRCD and \$60,000 for each education center during a 2-year period. Although statute specifies the maximum amounts the department may request, there are no minimum or maximum funding requirements for NRCDs. Also, subject to legislative appropriation, the department may distribute \$5,000 from the Environmental Special Plate Fund to each education center.

In practice, the State Land Department provides an equal amount of funding to each NRCD and education center for a given fiscal year. Funding for NRCDs and education centers has decreased since FY 2001. However, the main source of the reduction has been to the education centers. *Table 2* displays the amount of funding per NRCD and education center in FY 2001, FY 2005, and FY 2006.

Table 2			
<u>Fund Per NRCD and Education Center</u>			
	<u>FY 2001</u>	<u>FY 2005</u>	<u>FY 2006</u>
Funding Per NRCD ^{1/}	\$14,380	\$12,500	\$13,000
Fund Per Education Center ^{2/}	\$6,150	\$1,430	\$1,430
^{1/} There were 32 NRCDs in each fiscal year. ^{2/} There were 26 education centers in FY 2001, and 21 in FY 2005 and FY 2006.			

Recent Performance Measures

Table 3 lists performance measures currently used by the State Land Department to assess the effectiveness of the NRCD program. None of these measures appear in the General Appropriation Act.

The performance measures for “district meetings attended” and “interagency meetings attended” evaluate the amount of meetings in which the Manager of the State Land Department’s Natural Resource Conservation Division is present. It is useful for the department to track the number of NRCD meetings and interagency meetings to make sure the NRCD is operating properly and become familiar with NRCD supervisors and employees. These performance measures are more a function of the amount of money received by the department than the effectiveness of the program. Instead, the State Land Department should consider a performance measure to track the number of NRCDs in compliance with state laws. Since the department is responsible the oversight of NRCDs, this would provide an indication of the department’s effectiveness at regulating the NRCDs.

The performance measure for “percent of NRCDs rating department assistance as satisfactory” provides insight regarding client satisfaction. However, this measure would be more useful if it reported the average rating reported by NRCDs.

Table 3		
<u>NRCD Program</u>		
<u>Performance Measures</u>		
<u>Performance Measures</u>	<u>FY 2004 Actual</u>	<u>FY 2006 Estimate</u>
District meetings attended	25	30
Interagency meetings attended	30	40
Percent of NRCD’s rating department assistance as satisfactory	90	90